

Postdoctoral fellows use proximity to help land local academic positions

By Jacqueline Powell

Finding a local academic position is a challenge many postdoctoral research fellows take on. Two NIEHS fellows pulled off that feat this year, and their stories shed light on preparation that can pave the way for success in the academic job market.

Hazel Nichols, Ph.D., The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

In January, after just two years as a research fellow under the mentorship of Dale Sandler, Ph.D., head of the NIEHS Epidemiology Branch, Nichols became an assistant professor at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) Gillings School of Global Public Health. In Sandler's lab, Nichols' research focused on breast cancer prevention and long-term survival, using sound epidemiologic evidence to inform personal and medical decision-making.

To prepare for a faculty position, Nichols began seeking funding opportunities soon after she arrived at NIEHS and received an award from the Avon Foundation. Although the opportunity at UNC presented itself earlier than expected, Nichols' mentor was very encouraging.

Although Nichols became aware of the position through a nationally posted announcement, the accessibility of UNC provided the advantage of networking opportunities. When she applied, Nichols was attending a cancer outcomes breakfast series at UNC and had also attended occasional seminars.

The proximity of UNC to NIEHS may be more of an asset now, because it facilitates collaboration on research she began as a fellow. "While being geographically close isn't required to collaborate, it's certainly much easier with face-to-face meetings," Nichols said.

Nichols received concrete support at NIEHS throughout the interview process, including critique of her interview seminar by Epidemiology Branch colleagues. An academic job seminar given by Sharon Milgram, Ph.D., director of the NIH Office of Intramural Training and Education, was also extremely valuable. "[Milgram] was available by email for follow-ups, and was very helpful when it was time to interview and negotiate the offer," Nichols said.

Her tradition of success continues. Since arriving at UNC, Nichols has secured a position on a National Institutes of Health National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences KL2 Mentored Clinical Research Scholar Award, as well as pilot funds from the UNC Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center and the National Cancer Institute Cancer Research Network.

Sabrina Robertson, Ph.D., North Carolina State University

Sabrina Robertson, Ph.D., began her new career in July as an assistant professor in the Department of Molecular Biomedical Sciences at the North Carolina State University (NCSU) College of Veterinary Medicine. Prior to that, she was a researcher under the mentorship of Patricia Jensen, Ph.D., head of the NIEHS Developmental Neurobiology Group.

During the third year of her fellowship, Robertson requested and received Jensen's support for teaching a course at NCSU, enabling Robertson to acquire valuable experience. While the responsibilities of leading the course required her to lecture multiple times a week at NCSU, Robertson managed simultaneously to uphold her teaching responsibilities, continue her research, and publish an article in a high-impact journal.

Teaching at NCSU also helped Robertson foster local professional connections. Winning an end-of-semester teaching award helped prove her teaching skills, and stretching herself to meet all these responsibilities was important in shaping Robertson's career path.

Although it was over a year before she saw an opening for a full-time teaching position at NCSU, Robertson's applications and interviews for other positions provided her with materials to work from. That proved invaluable, as she had only one week from the time she saw the listing to submit her application materials.

Robertson now coordinates a large core course in molecular biology, with three teaching postdoctoral fellows, six teaching assistants, and one lab manager. The course enrolls undergraduate and graduate students and involves weekly lectures and labs. Robertson is also responsible for designing new courses and will write grants and publish scholarly articles on student learning practices in the years to come.

In addition to her teaching experience and strong research background, Robertson's multiple leadership activities at NIEHS may have helped set her apart from other applicants. She actively volunteered for the NIEHS Trainees Assembly, organizing the distinguished lecture brown bag lunch series, and served on the career fair organizational committee.

(Former NIEHS postdoctoral fellow Jacqueline Powell, Ph.D., is a writer and analyst with Education and Training Systems International.)



"Open communication with your mentor is extremely important. [Sandler] was very supportive about my application for the position, her main concern being whether or not it was a good fit for me," Nichols said. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



"Having experience teaching a course is absolutely necessary to be competitive for a teaching position," Robertson said. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

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